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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 005422

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SUBJECT: REACHING OUT TO SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

REF: DAMASCUS 5030

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires William Roebuck, for reasons 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: While we continue to meet with and provide whatever support we can to political opposition figures and human rights activists in this very repressive atmosphere, we are also attempting to reach to Syria's wider civil society. This wider civil society in Syria may provide a significant opportunity for U.S. influence but equally presents some of the greatest challenges. The opportunities occur because openings in society since 2001 have permitted the increase of activities, such as the formation of many new NGO's (albeit with limited mandates), the activities of business groups unconnected to the corrupt establishment circles and Internet-based networking and publicizing activities. While Bashar pursues limited economic reforms which may encourage these trends, the SARG realizes the danger from civil society and has increasingly used the security services to intimidate anyone who engages in political activity. The SARG realizes our interest in engaging civil society and over the past 18 months has sought to limit opportunities for the USG to engage publicly or privately with Syrian citizens. In addition to fear of the security forces, rising anti-Americanism, incited by the regime, has clearly become an issue in Syria, and some parts of civil society refuse to engage with the US. Despite these obstacles we see opportunities in activities involving graduates returning home from overseas study, U.S.-trained doctors, person-to-person diplomacy and outreach to activists in non-traditional fields such as the sciences. End Summary.

¶2. (C) FIRST PRIORITY: THE OPPOSITION. . .: Our first priority remains meetings with opposition activists to offer whatever help is possible in this repressive environment. Opposition figures are active in several ways. Former political prisoner and MP Riad Seif, for example, meets relatively openly with diplomatic contacts, encouraging their governments to maintain pressure on the Syrian regime, especially in the areas of human rights and Lebanon. He heads the Damascus Declaration (DD) steering group, which meets regularly to plan modest public protests and other activities, including issuing statements, aimed at keeping their agenda for democratic change and protection of basic human rights in Syria in the public eye. Activists like Seif have experienced the full panoply of Syrian government repression since 2000 as the SARG has sought to intimidate them and shut their voices. Arrests, show trials based on trumped up charges, and long prison sentences have been used for those identified as the political or intellectual leaders, such as Seif, who served more than four years in prison for his Damascus Spring activities. More modest but

effective tactics are also used, including systematic surveillance, harassment of activists and threats to them and their family members, beatings at protests, and repeated summons to security services facilities for intimidating interrogations. These moderately less coercive tactics have been practiced over the past six years through periods of crackdown as well as during periods of relative easing, such as in 2005, when the Damascus Declaration group managed to issue its original manifesto without experiencing arrests or trials.

¶3. (C) . . . GIVING IT FURTHER SUPPORT: Although severely constrained in what we can offer to the opposition from within Syria, we continue to look for ways to increase support. Some activists suggest we consider doing more, such as: technical training in areas such as Web design and election monitoring; USG assistance for members of Syria-based organizations to hold meetings with expatriate Syrians; English language training for activists; the development of a strong USG media strategy toward Syria, including increased reporting on SARG policies and human rights violations. For example, several Kurdish activist commented recently that Al-Hurra rarely covers arrests, detentions without charge, and the banning by security services of planned protests in Syria. Although Al-Hurra would have difficulty operating on the ground in Syria it would be possible to cover events over the telephone with Syrian analysis and observers, they said. The family of political prisoner Kamal Labwani has also noted the absence of coverage human rights violations in Syria.

¶4. (C) SOME GROWTH IN CIVIL SOCIETY. . .: Although not moving at anywhere near the speed of civil society in other

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countries in the region, civil society in Syria has developed significantly in the last six years in Syria, with the formation or growth of women's groups, NGO's tied to First Lady Asma al-Asad, businessmen's groups, social welfare organizations of the type that responded so actively during the refugee crisis provoked in Syria this summer by the fighting in Lebanon, environmental groups, bloggers (with All4Syria founder Ayman Abdul Noor leading the field), and others. There has also been an important increase in the number of Sunni groups doing charity work for the poor, an apparent SARG nod to the growing Islamist religious fervor in Syria. Even the more controversial human rights activists who publicize political trials and other abuses began and greatly expanded the scope of their activities during this six-year period (although the latest wave of repression in 2006 has silenced most of them and severely cramped their activities).

¶5. (C) . . .AND SARG-IMPOSED LIMITS: This growth has been possible for a number of reasons including the Internet, greater economic opening (and the modest political opening that led to the short-lived Damascus Spring in 2001), efforts of the EU and UNDP, and the return of Syrian graduates from studies in the U.S. Of course, few of these groups cross any political redlines. If they do, they are certain to face the repressive measure listed above for political activists. The SARG has created an environment of public intimidation and repressive nationalism, with President Asad warning in interviews that any cooperation with foreign governments would be considered a sign of disloyalty. The Embassy has to be careful about efforts to reach out to civil society. In November, the SARG closed AmidEast, an NGO closely affiliated with the U.S. Embassy, which has been operating for 30 years in Syria, on the pretext that it did not have a license.

¶6. (C) PERMITS REFUSED IN MOST CASES: Civil society activists in apolitical fields must be careful. They face the prospect of regular summons for intimidating interrogations, travel bans, warnings -- if the focus is even slightly political or controversial -- to stop their activities because they do not have (and cannot obtain)

permits from the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs authorizing their activities and meetings. (Note: Although the Ministry possesses formal authority to issue such permits, it is the security services, activists tell us, that usually signal to the Ministry which groups get permits and which do not. Most do not get them.) The majority of civil society activists are forced to operate in situations of illegality or quasi-legality, which the SARG officials tolerate when it suits them, and uses to crack down when deemed necessary. There is considerable fear of the security forces, which leads to significant self-censorship.

17. (C) SEEKING NEW AREAS OF INFLUENCE: Despite the current crackdown and pressure on Embassy outreach efforts, Post is continuously seeking new areas to influence in the civil society arena. We see particular promise in Syrian graduates of U.S. universities, women business leaders, scientists, environmentalists, and others.

18. (C) NEW INITIATIVES: Post's building upon its past strategy, with an increased focus on "Civil Society Strong" initiatives, will include:

-- Increased outreach to individuals and groups active on non-political issues, which impact a wide range of Syrians but have typically been monopolized by the entrenched regime elements. For example, we are developing strategies to broaden our outreach to and support of Syrian-American medical society, which is trying to reform the selection process for medical training currently monopolized by Ba'ath Party candidates.

-- Strengthening of our civil society contact base outside the capital. For example, reporting officers plan in the coming months to travel to coastal cities, as well as northeastern Syria, to meet with a range of businessmen and civil society contacts. Consular staff made a similar trip to Aleppo in late November to meet with wardens and other consular contacts (and plan similar trips in the future). Charge is exploring the option for trips to smaller Syrian cities such as Homs. The idea here is that civil activism in one area bleeds into others.

-- Organizing creative, cultural events such as the October

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16 "Sahour" (reported reftel) that emphasize respect for local tradition.

-- Expanded people-to-people contacts. As one example, we have sought out more opportunities for consular staff to give informational lectures to young Syrians who are seeking student visas to the United States. Separately, Post brought an American photographer this fall to participate in an international photo exhibition in Aleppo. He also gave two successful series of photography workshops in Damascus and Aleppo. Additionally, PAO developed and is teaching an American film forum studies at the American Language Center.

-- Seeking ways to do capacity building within the human rights community, including the fall 2006 enrollment of 11 activists in English language training at the American Language Center.

-- Seeking out civil society contacts who work in fields with fewer direct political overtones. For example, over the past year, Post has facilitated the creation of a women's business group which meets regularly for presentations, meals, and discussions. Post is working on the next session for the group, which would include a tour of a boutique hotel built and run by one of the businesswomen, followed by a lunch focusing on her presentation of lessons learned from starting up a business without paying a single bribe; and

-- Maximizing the impact of Post's limited grants for the biggest possible effect. For example, this year Post

obtained a USD 20,000 Ambassador's Fund grant for the Syrian Red Crescent, headed by a prominent Sunni businessman, to buy x-ray equipment for a new clinic serving the neediest of the estimated 450,000 displaced Iraqis and other Damascus-based refugees.

19. (C) COMMENT: For almost two years now, the SARG has responded to the USG-led isolation of Syria by seeking to limit official contacts between Embassy officers and private Syrians. The SARG seems to be more sensitive to some contacts than others, calibrating its methods of pressure to what it sees as potential risks. Based on our experience, the SARG has been particularly sensitive to contacts with religious authorities, high-level opposition figures, and, increasingly, business notables. Despite these obstacles and given our long-term regional objectives, we see important potential and value in building bridges between the U.S. and Syria by engaging with graduates returning to Syria from overseas training and with U.S.-trained doctors and by beefing up our person-to-person diplomacy and outreach to activists in non-traditional fields such as the sciences. We will continue to look for new opportunities that do not endanger the individuals with whom we seek to engage.

ROEBUCK